



# DEFYING THE EMPIRE: AHOM RESISTANCE TO MUGHAL IMPERIALISM

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand Mughal imperialism in North-east India through a case study of the Ahom kingdom, whose borders are substantially represented by the present borders of Assam. The paper explores the centrality of the Ahom kingdom in Mughal expansion in the North-eastern part of India by underlining the dynamics of trade and the strategic and military importance of the Ahom kingdom for the Mughal empire. The paper will delve into the myriad forms of imperialistic controls, ranging from outright military intervention to cultural and symbolic forms of authority, which the Mughal exerted, or attempted, on the Ahoms in the 17th century, particularly during and after the imperial campaigns of 1662-63 led by the Mughal commander Mir Jumla into the Brahmaputra valley. These forms of imperial controls entailed military warfare, gift of *Khilat* to Ahom court, extraction of tribute, desecration and looting of temples and royal tombs. By analysing the role of military, topography, and cultural practises of the Ahoms, the paper outlines the various ways in which Ahoms resisted Mughal imperialism. The cultural practices, such as issue of new types of coinage, and a shift to worship of older Ahom gods, is discussed to foreground Ahom symbolic forms of resistance and as means employed to re-assert Ahom authority in times of turmoil. Success of Ahom resistance was to a great degree contingent on the local environment, and it was their knowledge of it that enabled them to halt Mughal expansion in the Brahmaputra valley. While physical attributes of Ahom kingdom acted as natural vanguard against Mughal imperialism, the paper also explores military, administrative and cultural responses to Mughal power.

**KEYWORDS:** Ahom, Assam, Conflict, Imperialism, Mughal, Resistance

## INTRODUCTION

Mughal imperialism in the north-eastern part of India during the 17<sup>th</sup> century was halted by the Ahom state. Not much attention was paid to Ahom-Mughal wars by colonial historians. It was only after Indian independence that the conflict received serious academic interest and passed into popular narratives. Historians working on Assam have variously hailed Ahom resistance as the major opposition to Mughal expansion in North-east India. The paper will delve into the details of the forms of resistances which enabled the Ahoms to resist the Mughal advance.

### The Conflict

The Mughal conflict with the Ahoms began in 1615, soon after the Mughals asserted control over the regions of Kamrup and Koch Behar in 1613. Mughal incursions into the Ahom kingdom were undertaken only after a modicum of Mughal control was achieved over Bengal.<sup>1</sup> The rich mineral resources of the Brahmaputra valley such as gold, pepper, lignum wood, etc. played an important role in attracting Mughal attention. Textiles might also have played an important role.<sup>2</sup>

However, the major attraction for the Mughals were elephants, the most important instruments of war in India. Used from before the emergence of the Mauryan empire as a military weapon, the elephant saw a resurgence in its military application in 16<sup>th</sup> century North India. However, raising elephants in captivity is uneconomical as they reach their full size only around their 20<sup>th</sup> year. Therefore, they were captured from forests as full-fledged adults. Both the Mughal and Ahom states are known to have launched regular large-scale hunting expeditions for capturing the animal. The Ahom kingdom had a monopoly on the capture of elephants within its boundaries and used it extensively in combat.<sup>3</sup> This need for elephants was one of the motives for the Mughal movement towards, what they considered, the “unhealthy, malaria-infested forest fringes of the Himalayas, Assam, Bengal and Orissa.”<sup>4</sup> Mir Jumla, the commander of the Mughal expedition into the Ahom state in 1662, made concerted efforts to find local mahouts who were expert at capturing elephants and attempted to take them from the Ahom kingdom but ultimately failed in his objective.<sup>5</sup>

Another important factor may have been the lucrative trade with China and Tibet that passed through Assam. Trade between Bengal and Tibet also passed through northern Assam. Some scholars argue that the Assam-Tibet/Bhutan trade was more profitable than the Assam-Bengal trade but Nisar Ahmed opines that ultimately the Assam-Bengal trade generated more profit. Ahmed has made a similar argument for interest of Ahoms and Turko Afghans in the region. He states that this lucrative trade might have been the reason that efforts were made by the Turko-Afghans and Tai-Shans (Ahoms) to conquer the Brahmaputra valley, but due to the lack of data the argument remains in the realm of speculation.<sup>6</sup>

However, attitudes towards trade were always tinged with apprehension within the Ahom political class. Chevalier in his work relates his meeting with the Ahom King that ended in refusal of the King to give permission to the French East India

Company to conduct trade in the Ahom kingdom. This incident is telling about the rationale which informed Ahom mistrust of foreigners, shaped by Ahom-Mughal tensions in the previous century. The King recounted how Mughals used trade as a prelude to launch attack on the Ahoms, using spies disguised as traders to gain information about the kingdom and were enticed by the wealth in it. However, after their initial victories, the Mughals were unable to subjugate the Ahoms and retreated. For King Rajeswar, the turning point was an act of God's grace and he states “All seemed lost until the heavens acted in his favour. Illness settled in the camp of the enemy after its victory, causing great ravages and destroying it.” Rajeswar was therefore apprehensive of French inroads into Assam, for he feared that the Europeans, on the pretext of trade, would use the opportunity, just like the Mughals, to overthrow the king and annex the Ahom kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

Mughal incursions in Ahom kingdoms, hence, were shaped by mixed motives of strategic considerations, acquisition of profitable trade and war elephants. The most serious Mughal campaign against the Ahom kingdom occurred between the years 1662-63. This campaign followed the communication network created by the Karotoya and Brahmaputra rivers but their victory turned to defeat when the rains began and they found that “the limited, seasonal navigation of the latter river could not sustain a prolonged campaign under a climate that ... [was] rank poison to foreigners.”<sup>8</sup> Mir Jumla, the Mughal commander, was forced to negotiate the Treaty of Ghilajarighat in 1663. By the provisions of this treaty the Mughals retreated in return for the Ahom kingdom ceding some territories, giving a significant amount of gold and silver, annual tribute of elephants, and sending brides to the imperial harem.<sup>9</sup> The Mughals left with the impression that they had managed to bring the recalcitrant Ahom kingdom under its suzerainty while the Ahoms believed, in light of Rajeswar Singha's earlier statement, that the heavens themselves opened up to deliver them from their calamity. The Ahom king during the invasion, Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-1663), soon died and the new King, Chakradhwaj Singha (1663-1670), renewed the war in 1667. The Mughals were defeated in the battle of Saraighat (near Guwahati) in 1671 and retreated. However, through intrigue they retook Guwahati in the late 1670s. The Ahoms fought another battle with them in 1682 at Itakhuli where they defeated the Mughals. This was the last Ahom-Mughal conflict.<sup>10</sup>

### Forms of Mughal Imperialism

Mughal intervention in the Ahom Kingdom had begun as early as 1615 but armed intervention was accompanied by cultural forms of imperial rule. The Mughals sought to politically subordinate the Ahoms through symbolic forms of control, i.e., by sending robe of honours (*Khilat*) to the Ahom court. Gordon has argued that robes were a part of the 'transactional' symbols by which kings established relations inside and outside their realm. While the specific details of the ceremony varied widely, the acceptance of a robe was seen as a precise recognition of the personal authority of the Mughal monarch, helping create a direct personal link between the sovereign and recipient. The ceremony was always done in front of an audience, demonstrating the munificence of the “giver and, in return, the recognition of the honoured position of the receiver”.<sup>11</sup>

While the Ahom-Mughal conflict was fought in the military sphere another battle was fought out in the diplomatic/cultural sphere. For example, when Chakradhvaj Singha came to the throne the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb sent him greetings on the occasion. He also sent a *Sirpao* (head-to-foot robe of honour) with his envoys and warned the King that unless he dons the garment the Mughals will wage a new war. The King, affronted, sent the messengers back.<sup>12</sup> In another version of the incident, the Emperor sent a *Sirpao* to Chakradhvaj Singha which he was required to wear in front of the envoys. The King consulted with his officials on how to avoid such an act. Ultimately they bribed the envoys, treating them with utmost respect, and made sure that after the robe of honour was displayed in front of the King it was directly transferred into the treasury, without being worn.<sup>13</sup>

In the context of military conflict, the Mughals used acts of temple desecration to assert their political authority in the Ahom frontier. Eaton in his work on temple desecration in medieval India, has shown that temple desecration was not a simple or random act of religious fanaticism, but that such acts typically occurred in the context of military and political confrontations. Temples and images were important to the state, to some extent, for the personification of the state's political authority through them. Eaton has shown how such personification of the state's political authority within images of gods was an integral part of Indian political behaviour. Temple desecration happened under Islamic rule to delegitimize the ruling houses and mark the passage of one political order to another. Eaton's work is helpful in understanding the acts of temple desecration by Mughals in their military expeditions against the Ahoms. The Mughal army destroyed or damaged temples that were situated within the Ahom territory. Just before Mir Jumla carried out his invasion of the Ahom kingdom he had the royal temple of Koch Behar destroyed though the local people were not harmed. In the Ahom kingdom, he destroyed the principal temple at Garhgaon and replaced it with a mosque.<sup>14</sup> Mir Jumla also had the temple at Devargaon destroyed with cannons and fed beef to the heads of Vaishnavite monasteries.<sup>15</sup>

Under the onslaught of the Mughal imperial machine in 1662 the Ahom army was defeated and retreated. King Jayadvaj Singha, along with members of his court, fled into the hills while the Mughals took over the capital at Garhgaon. While there Mir Jumla found out that the Ahom nobility buried their dead in tombs called *Maidams* along with their patrimonial properties. High-ranking officials and the nobles "put utensils made of gold and silver, carpet, dress materials and eatables necessary for a few years inside it."<sup>16</sup> He therefore had them dug and removed much gold and silver, along with bones of Ahom ancestors. The Ahom king, when he found out about it, was horrified and grieved his inability to protect even the bones of his ancestors. He then ordered his nobles to launch unrelenting attacks on the Mughals.<sup>17</sup>

#### Ahom Resistance: Forms of Resistance to Mughal Imperialism

There was a whole body of historical narratives in the Ahom kingdom termed the *Buranjis* which discuss the history of the Ahom rule, their administration, diplomacy, aspects of economy, etc. One important aspect discussed by them is also warfare with their neighbours. They give detailed narrative of the warfare with the Mughals. The Mughal invasion of 1662 almost succeeded in defeating the Ahom kingdom. This knowledge was not lost on the Ahoms. Therefore, they took active measures to resist Mughal imperialism, whether by gaining a thorough knowledge of their administration, diplomacy and history, or through cultural measures to declare their sovereignty. Ahom rulers took care to understand the enemy that they were combating and encouraged their writers to write chronicles solely devoted to detailing the history and administration of Mughal rule. One such chronicle is titled *Padshah Buranji*.<sup>18</sup> Ahoms also had a dedicated department for translating Persian. The ability to speak Persian was highly prized and many of its high officers could speak the language. In fact, Chevalier, whose account has been used multiple times in the paper, interacted throughout his stay in the Ahom kingdom with high officials in Persian, a language which was not the first language of any of the participants.

The Ahoms had also built a robust military capacity. They had units of infantry, war elephants and also gunpowder technology. This military ability gave them the ability to resist the Mughal military onslaught. The European traveller Tavernier praised the quality of the gunpowder used in the region in the 1660s and postulated that they might have introduced the powder to China. Shehabuddin Talesh, a Mughal officer who accompanied Mir Jumla's invasion, rated Ahom gunpowder highly.<sup>19</sup>

Besides administrative and military measures, the Ahoms undertook a renewed devotion to their older gods, whose neglect was seen as one of the chief reasons for the almost Mughal victory. Chakradhvaj Singha, before restarting the war with the Mughal empire, attempted to correct this neglect by proceeding to offer sacrifices to Lengdon (Indra) and all the other traditional Ahom gods. Therefore, the king proceeded to Charaideo with the Gohains and performed the necessary rites before the commencement of hostilities with the Mughals in 1667.<sup>20</sup>

We can see the impact of these renewed activity even in the sphere of numismatics. The first Ahom coins were issued by Jayadvaj Singha but these only had his title, the year he came to the throne (1648), and an invocation of Krishna in Sanskrit. This Vaishnavite invocation is unique amongst Ahom kings but may be due to Jayadvaj's initiation into the Vaishnavite tradition. After him

all other Ahom kings preferred to invoke Siva. When Chakradhvaj Singha came to the throne in 1663, soon after the signing of the treaty with the Mughal empire, he introduced two innovations into the coinage. Firstly, he put not only his title but also his name on the coins in Sanskrit. Secondly, he also struck a second set of coins "using the old Ahom language, with his Ahom name Siupungmung, and an invocation to Pha Tara. The Sanskrit coins have an invocation to Siva and Rama, indicating his devotion to Siva, rather than to Visnu." This was probably an attempt to declare independence from the Mughals and throw off the vestige of any Mughal suzerainty implied by the treaty signed by his predecessor.<sup>21</sup>

However, while military strength, administrative measures and promotion of Persian language reinforced Ahom resistance to Mughals, it was the terrain and climatic conditions which formed a natural vanguard against Mughal imperialism. The Ahom kingdom was endowed with natural features such as lofty mountains, dense forests, stretches of floodplains, and inhospitable climate. These physical attributes of the terrain acted as natural vanguard against the Mughals. The next part of the paper will elaborate on this theme to reflect on the magnitude of difficulties the Mughal army faced and failed to overcome in their military campaigns against the Ahoms.

#### Natural Vanguard of Imperialism: Role of Topography

The present province of Assam, located within India's North-eastern region, substantially represents the territory of the medieval Ahom state. At its zenith, the Ahom kingdom's territory extended from the Patkai Hills in the east to the Manas river and Nagarbera in the west. It extended from the slopes of the Himalayas in the north to the Meghalaya plateau and the Jamuna river in the south. The most dominant physical feature of the region was, and is, the Brahmaputra river and its valley. The valley is divided into two divisions, Uttarkol (north bank) and Dakhinkol (south bank), by the river. This valley is surrounded on every side, except on the west, by mountains and is intersected by many streams flowing down from the neighbouring hills which empty into the Brahmaputra. Most of these mountain ranges are inhabited by different hill tribes.<sup>22</sup>

The province of Assam contains within itself hills, plateaus, alluvial and diluvial plains. Crammed between the Eastern Himalayas, Southern Tibet, China, and Burma, historically it was a secluded region.<sup>23</sup> However, while flanked by mountain ranges on three sides, and containing a fair share of hills within its own borders, the region was never entirely cut off from the rest of the world or the civilization of the Indo-Gangetic plains. It was regularly affected by the currents of historical change (bhakti movement, economic, and political changes, etc.) shaping the rest of the subcontinent.<sup>24</sup>

The valley's climate is typified by humid atmosphere, plenty of rainfall and cold foggy winter. The pre-monsoon season begins from March to May and is characterised by severe thunderstorms. It is succeeded in June by the south-west monsoon till the beginning of October, while October and November comprise the post-monsoon season. This is followed by the cold season from November to February. There is heavier rainfall in the north-eastern part of Upper Assam and the north-western Himalayan foothills of Lower Assam. These geographical features hindered state making efforts, for the rains did not grant large armies the mobility needed to pursue various refractory elements over the hilly landscape. Compared to other parts of India, people were more dependent on waterways as floods from May to October precluded road construction or maintenance.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, forest cover combined with mountainous terrain meant that the region had a relatively low population density. This hampered the mobility and reach of state making ventures. Sources, ranging from Ahom *Buranjis*, European travel accounts or Mughal accounts, repeatedly mention the difficulties of the physical environment in expanding the state's reach in the region. Chevalier in his account gives graphic description of how animals were killed in thousands in hunts by the Ahom kingdom. The state justified these killings by claiming that it was a necessary measure to protect the kingdom's crops.<sup>26</sup>

Wild animals were not the only threat of the forests and attack by tribal communities was also common. To give one example, while the Ahom King Supimphaa (1493-97) was once hunting in the forest some Nagas found out about it and sent men to kill him. But a different Naga headmen close to the Ahoms discovered the fact and informed him, allowing the King to escape back to his camp, leaving the hunt midway.<sup>27</sup>

The above discussion points us to a significant fact that the local kingdoms, despite having extensive knowledge and being accustomed to the environment, faced problems in navigating the topography. The indigenous tribes also used it to their advantage in their dealings with the Ahoms. A consideration of this fact is crucial to understand the manifold problems that the Mughal army, having no experience or knowledge of this terrain, faced.

Fortunately, we have a first-hand account of the extreme difficulties the Mughal army faced in the terrain and dense jungles of Assam and the ways in which terrain dampened the imperialist thrust. An important source for the history of the Ahom kingdom comes from the pen of Shehabuddin Talesh, a Mughal official who accompanied the Mughal expedition to the Ahom kingdom in the years 1661-63 CE and wrote an account of it.

The terrain's difficulty made the Mughals heavily dependent on the active support of the local Zamindars, who were necessary to guide the imperial army through hostile and unfamiliar territories. Even during the dry season mobility was made difficult by the dense foliage. The following example exemplifies this point. When Mir Jumla (commander of the Mughal forces) invaded Assam (1662-63) the invading imperial army came across a dense forest of Khakar (reeds), so thick and strong like bamboo that even their elephants could not part it. The army worked round the clock to clear a path but could only march, at the most, five kilometres per day. The sharp points of the reeds regularly pierced the soldiers' feet, while the cavalry were thrown on the ground. The injured troops were also badly affected by fatal diseases such as pleurisy. "During a whole day," Talesh wrote, "even a narrow path could not be cleared despite so much difficulties and physical pains."<sup>28</sup>

Talesh puts forward arguments highlighting the importance of climate, terrain, and ecology in informing the intransigent attitude of the regional kingdoms, and their ability to capitalise on their knowledge of the local environment, when confronted with the might of invading armies. While describing the inability of kingdoms, for example the Delhi Sultanate, in bringing the Brahmaputra valley under their control Talesh highlights the continuance of the same problems for the Mughal forces.<sup>29</sup> The Mughals faced sufficient difficulties adapting to the unfamiliar environment for Talesh to comment that "the climactic condition of the territories nearer the bank of Barhmaputra [Brahmaputra] is equally suitable for both natives and foreigners. But the climate of the area from the said river is comfortable and suitable only to the native population, but it is like the venom of a snake for the strangers."<sup>30</sup>

The rains posed a major set-back to the Mughals. Military manoeuvres became almost impossible as rain continued incessantly for eight months. It occasionally rained even during the four months of winter.<sup>31</sup> Chevalier, who travelled in the Brahmaputra valley in the 1750s, was surprised by the ferocity of the rains in December, as Bengal doesn't have any rain at that time.<sup>32</sup> During the rains supply lines were completely cut off, leaving the invading army vulnerable to starvation. Cavalry was rendered useless and the perpetual guerrilla tactics sapped morale leading to death or capture. "In this manner," in Talesh's words, "a large, powerful and dignified armed force, caught in a horrible whirlpool were decimated in the depth of the river."<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The above section highlights that the success of Ahom resistance was to a great degree contingent on the local environment, and it was their knowledge of it that enabled them to halt Mughal expansion in the Brahmaputra valley. However, reducing the complex interplay of causality behind the Mughal retreat from the Brahmaputra valley to a factor of topography undermines the cultural, military and administrative responses from the Ahom kingdom which were utilised to resist such advances of imperialism. This paper has looked at active measures deployed to resist Mughal imperialism, whether by gaining a thorough knowledge of Mughal/enemy's administration, diplomacy and history, or through cultural measures to assert Ahom sovereignty.

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